JESUS THE TROUBLER
Zechariah 9:9-10
Matthew 21:1-14

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George Bernard Shaw once noted that "humanity crucifies its best men and glorifies its worst". Consider, for instance, the list of names and dates. Robert Kennedy, June 12, 1968: Martin Luther King, April 4, 1968: John Kennedy, November 22, 1963. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis, April 9, 1945. Mahatma Ghandi, shot, January 30, 1948: Edith Cavell, English nurse, shot by the German government, whose last words were, "Patriotism is not enough", October 15, 1915.

Go back a century. Abraham Lincoln, April 15, 1865. Go back several centuries. Savonarola, hung and burned at the stake in Florence, May 21, 1498. Joan of Arc, May 30, 1431. And sometime in the year 399 BC a man by the name of Socrates was tried, convicted and made to drink poison for being a corrupter of youth.

Some were executed by governments acting officially. Some were assisinated by lone individuals for reasons they alone knew. But the reason for their demise, whatever its form and particularity, was that they were - one and all - trouble makers, precipitators of crisis, people of courage and conviction who never learned the all important lesson of "leaving well enough alone".

People have never liked to be disturbed. People have never liked the individual who takes it on himself to point to the obvious discrepency between public affirmation and private behavior. Consider today the general disdain directed toward the American Civil Liberties Union, that body that keeps insisting that the Bill of Rights is, in fact, a reality. Consider the hatred directed toward the early leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. For many people it was - and still is- enough to say - "they are trouble makers, agitators." And the trouble they made was simply to confront the whole American people with the vast and sinful discrepency between the Constitution and actual public behavior. Consider Ralph Nader, contemporary trouble maker. Or more modestly, consider the cost to a private citizen today - to you or me - if we ask troublesome questions in the halls of government, in the schools, in the P.T.A. I made a telephone call one time to a

school official to ask what I thought was a routine question, and make what I thought was a reasonable suggestion. But all I made was an enemy for life and a reputation as a trouble maker. Try sometime, as I have, to ask that most logical question - "Why does the P.T.A. exist? And what creative contribution to the educational process of your children can you make besides selling chocolate bars to buy basketball uniforms for the B Team?" I can guarantee the result: people will regard you with great suspicion, and you will never be asked to be an officer.

People in the past, have not liked, and today do not like a trouble maker. If the trouble you make is loud enough and serious enough you will be crucified, in one way or another. That's what happened on this day, 1,972 years ago, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

But the Church - because it, as much as anyone else, doesn't like a trouble maker - notorously observes this day in the wrong manner. William Stringfellow observes that , "The disciples of Jesus Christ today keep returning to Palm Sunday, posessed with nostalgia for the parade." Let us be clear at the outset. It was no day of triumph. Easter is the victory. Palm Sunday is the day on which Jesus made trouble, the day which reveals him as a trouble maker, the event which seriously still makes us most uncomfortable. During this Lenten season we have been focussing on the person of Jesus: Jeasus the Man, the Teacher, the Compassionate, the Savior. The portrait if incomplete until we think about Jesus the Troubler.

So, let us look again at what really happened on this day. Let's forget about all those Sunday School pictures of well scrubbed children laying their branches in his path: let's get away from the "King for a Day" mentality - not because it wasn't like that - but in order to see the dynamics of what was happening. Let's try to keep in mind that whatever else Palm Sunday means, it was the prelude to Crucifixion: it was the event that made his death inevitable.

The city was filled with tourists and pilgrims . It was Passover week, and the ancient historian Josephus estimated that 2.7 million people came to the city for the celebration. The city was also filled with passion and patriotism.

Passover, you will recall, celebrates the liberation of the Jews from Egyptian slavery. It was thus a very threatening kind of event for the Romans who were enforcing their own brand of political oppression at that moment in time.

Jesus could have come into the city anonimously, observed the Passover rituals at the Temple, said his prayers quietly, and gone back to Galilea. No one would have noticed - and obviously there would have been no crucifixion five days later. Instead he chose to be as obvious as possible, deliberately to make the kind of trouble people don't like.

He chose to ride into the city on the back of an ass - a curious decision in that no where else in the entire Gospel narrative do we read about him riding anywhere, and in that Bethany - his departure point - was a mere mile and a half away. He chose, we must assume, to act out everybody's favorite scripture passage: Zecheriah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo,your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass....."

We've made a caricature out of donkeys. But in the ancient East the ass was the beast Kings rode when they came in peace. His choice of transportation was as significant as Mr. Nixon's decision to travel to Peking in a 707 rather than a B-52 Bomber.

Everyone knew the passage of scripture that far - told the coming of the Messiah. Everyone knew the significance of the beast he rode. More important, he knew that they would know.

The Predictable happened. The crowd recognized him: the rabble, the country people who had seen him in Galilea: the poor, the sick, the sinners, not the urbane Jerusalemites. His friends recognized him, and recognized what he was saying to Jerusalem and Rome, and so they tore the shirts from their backs and the very branches from the trees the same way that a football fan is compelled to participate in victory by flinging a hat in the air or tearing down a goal post.

The Messiah had come. The King had arrived to claim his Kingdom. They got the message - at least that part of it. So, of course, did the Temple priests

and Roman politicians who were getting a little nervous.

But then he did a very strange thing. He went to the Temple, with this yelling mob behind him. And there he turned over the tables of the money changers and drove out the salesmen and profiteers, and then sat down to receive the sick and poor and lame. And the crowd evaporated just like that. He had made a claim to Kingship, but when the specifics of that Kingship became clear, the parade stopped. And he was left alone with the people he threatened most severely - the priests and politicians.

Jesus made trouble, first by coming to the city, and not remaining in the safety of Galilee. And second, by translating a vague idea about a Messiah into a man who was the friend of the sick and lonely and outcast. He precipitated a crisis. He called into question the religious and ethical status quo: he threw down the gauntlet in front of the power structure - and in front of every individual present. He made so much trouble that most abandoned him immediately, and the rest began to plan for his execution.

Jesus is like that. He precipitates a crisis wherever he goes, and whenever he is taken seriously. And the response to him remains the same. People either refuse to hear the claim he makes - just as the crowd on Palm Sunday saw in him only what they wanted to see; or they abandon him when finally they do hear what he is saying.

One of the biggest fights I've ever been in had to do with a Statment of Mission I helped to write for the Synod of Indiana several years ago.

Listen to some of the offending exerpts.

'This statement affirms without equivocation the positive role of the Church as an agent in conflict as well as affirming the confessional stature of the Church as an agent of reconciliation....

The role of the Church as an agent in conflict develops from the concept that the church must move into conflict as an active participant. In many cases the posture of the Church will be that of a mediator and interpreter of crisis in order that conflict may be positively resolved. Given the world in which we live, it is

also incumbent upon the church in some situations to be the precipitator of crisis in order that the conflict may be brought into the open with the hope and intention that reconciliation will occur... The tragedy of the current situation in the Synod is that reconciliation is never effected by chosing the status quo, preserving the past or meerly ignoring conflict...

Well, that statement was discussed and argued for four days: we who wrote it and defended it were called communists, radicals and of course trouble makers. And the whole point is that even the Church doesn't really like what happened on Palm Sunday when we are honest; nor does the Church really like this Jesus who marches right into the city and turns over the tables in the temple.

To know Jesus Christ, to see what he did, and hear what he said, and feel his claim on my life is to be troubled. It's always been that way. There is no way to get around it if we are honest. Paul Scherer tells the story of John Newton, author of a number of beautiful hymns. Newton ran a slave ship, and it was his custom "to read the Anglican liturgy on deck at matins and evensong, amid the moans and stench of a doomed humanity boiling up out of the hold." But then John Newton heard and felt the real claim of Jesus Christ and the status quo became unbearable. He sold his ship and became a priest and wrote his hymns and his own epitaph which reads: "John Newton, Clerk

Once an Infidel and Liberative
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ
Preserved, Restored, Pardoned
And appointed to preach the Faith
He had long labored to destroy,

Jesus Christ is a trouble maker on the deepest personal level. He calls into question everything we live by. He demands that we examine our status quo. He comes marching into the center of our lives and if there are tables to be overturned, he overturns them.

Understandably, we would rather not deal with that kind of Lord. And so,

like those people who cheered his entry to the city, we try to make him into the Lord we want. We want a savior, mild and gentle, an inoffensive Jesus who stays on the periphery of our lives. We want a popular Jesus who will settle for lip service and ask no more a Lord content with a weekly affirmation of faith and two dollars in the plate.

And that is exactly the kind of Jesus, the kind of Gospel and the kind of Church that is ever so popular. The kind that is content with a decision for Christ, a verbal affirmation of his Lordship made publically, and repeated over and over again without ever once calling into question the deepest convictions and opinions and prejudices by which men and women really live.

The drame of Palm Sunday means that a verbal affirmation of faith in Christ means nothing until it cuts into the heart and behavior of the individual who makes it. The crowd called him Lord. The crowd made public and verbal testimony - and then left when the going got tough. Early in his ministry Jesus said: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father.

Because he came into the city, a Christian decision today is always a secular decision; not a testimony made in the safety of a worship service, but an economic decision, a political decision,a social decision made in light of his Lordship over my life and over all the society. Palm Sunday means that what you say you believe about Jesus Christ - the verbal palm branches you wave - doesn't matter, until you begin to feel his Lordship in the dirt and dust of common life.

Issues like education and taxes and juvenile justice and prison reform and war and racism and poverty and welfare - are the city for us today - the city in which Jesus Christ must be Lord. The city in which he is always a trouble maker; thecity in which he calls us to be his people.

That, I would suggest is the real meaning of Palm Sunday. Jesus the Troubler. Knowing that, let us return to the celebration; grateful that he had one moment of victory, that he heard the shouts and saw the crowds. And then let us be open to his Lordship in our lives. May our Hosanna's sung today mean that we will

not draw back - that we will not abandon him in our city - that we will indeed follow, right up to the foot of the cross AMEN

Father, we would be happier if the story ended with the parade. Help us, as we move through this Holy Week, to feel his claim upon our lives. When we have a quiet moment, help us to remember that that this week is Holy - because it is the week in which he died. AMEN